

FAMILY WRITING

Title of Manuscript: Family Writing: Voices in Print, Voices Heard

Date: April 2, 2013

Author Information:

First Author:

Timothy G. Weih, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Education
Department of Curriculum and Instruction
University of Northern Iowa

Mailing Address:
5527 Applewood Lane
Cedar Falls, IA 50613

Email Address:
timothy.weih@uni.edu

Phone:
(319) 429-5812

Second Author:

Jennifer Shaffer
Combination First and Second Grade Teacher
Iowa City Community School District, Iowa City, Iowa

Mailing Address:
1702 11th Street
Coralville, IA 52241

Email Address:
shaffer.jennifer@iccsd.k12.ia.us

Phone:

(319)-530-0339

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Abstract

What can family members learn about each other from writing together? What sense of community can develop between family members and across families as they write together? What areas of culture and community can be realized as families write together? These are the questions that fostered this current inquiry into a family writing project. Four families, connected through an urban community school, met together to write and share with one another. Excerpts of adult and children's writing is included and discussed along with the structure of developing a family writing project. Implications for classroom practices for teaching writing with children are discussed.

Keywords: after-school programs; emergent writing; beginning writing; student writing; adult writing; family writing; children's writing; literacy learning community; family culture; writing process; home-school connections; teacher/parent/student collaborations

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Family literacy programs can provide an opportunity for students and their parents to write and share their writing together, therefore providing a means for their sometimes marginalized voices to be heard (Moll, 1992; Pratore, Melzi, & Krol-Sinclair, 1999). Family literacy programs share the notion that all family members can contribute valuable funds of knowledge which challenges societal assumptions that parents and family members either lack the ability or the interest to help their children with their school work (Moll, 1992). By examining, live, situated activity where families are engaged with one another in making meaning of their world, we can come to truly appreciate the purposes of literacy in our lives today (Barton & Hamilton, 2000).

In a family writing project, it is important to include all family members, even the very young. Children learn about many of the conventions of writing from the observations of environmental print even before formal instruction even begins, and many young children begin school believing they can write (Calkins, 1994). However, it is very important for the older family members to allow whatever markings the younger children want to make and not expect their writing to look like adult writing (Cusumano, 2008). Vygotsky (1978) noted that writing consists of a system of signs, or markings, that stand for the sounds and words of spoken language. Clay (1998) holds that young children's writing and oral language share many similarities and that it is important to allow children to explore and discover for themselves how writing works, rather than have conventional rules imposed upon them too early in their development. Writing is a means of communication and a way in which family members can express their ideas in a clear and logical fashion (Graves, 1994). When parents look at their children's writing, it

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is important for them to think about the meaning that they are trying to communicate, whether this may be in the form of attempted alphabetic letters, words, phrases, or in illustrations. It is often the case that young children do not see the difference between writing and drawing because to them, they both convey the meaning that they want to express (Mayer, 2007). So many times, parents focus mainly on the spelling of the words their children write than on the meaning that they are trying to convey (Goodman, 1993; Graves, 1994). Bissix (1985) described adults' need to correct writing errors: "because when an error is in writing, it may appear permanent and thus in need of immediate erasure and correction lest it become established" (p. 99). Bissix (1985) presents a paradox: "Although adults have faith that children will learn to speak correctly, they often believe that these same children need constant instruction and correction in order to learn to write" (p. 99). When young children write, they incorporate all of their knowledge of written symbols, which may include illustrations plus numbers, and in addition, as Clay (1975) wrote: "When written vocabulary is limited the child must force what he wants to say into the mould of what he is able to write" (p. 10). Instead of emphasizing correctness, which could stifle the beginning processes of writing, young writers should be encouraged to elaborate their ideas and to cultivate their expressive voices. Mayer, Lester, and Pradl (1983) described writing as a "developmental process, which first emphasizes fluency, then clarity, and finally correctness" (p. 5). Even the writing process of adults can be minimized when an over-emphasis of correctness supersedes that of content. Perl (1979) studied the writing of a small group of adults and found that when the focus shifts to correctness, "[adult] students begin to conceive of writing as a 'cosmetic' process where concern for correct form supersedes development

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of ideas” (p. 328). Frequently, students write a piece and the teacher corrects and revises the writing giving it back to the students with the expectation that they will copyedit the revisions; however, the teacher’s markings present new information and learning for the students. As Barnes (1993) pointed out the “child is likely to be involved in a series of readjustments and discoveries that may take some time...[a process] necessitating a period to reconstruct existing ideas in light of new experiences, new ideas, new ways of thinking and understanding” (p. 24). In this light, instead of immediately understanding and integrating the teacher’s edits into his writing, the child will write a completely different response. Clay (1975) also noted this period of readjustment due to new learning: “Because early learning is both approximate and specific, any one new insight may change the child’s perception of the entire system drastically, or may even disorganize it” (p. 15). Children develop ownership over their personal writing and can see the teacher’s markings as an intrusion, and when only the incorrectness is marked, the child can come to view himself as a mistake-maker, a failure in writing, and ultimately refusing to participate in writing assignments.

Many family literacy projects are aimed at making the home more school-like or making the classroom more home-like, but the project described in this article was focused on bringing families together in hopes that through their writing and sharing together that they would experience the value that literacy holds in their lives. An enthusiastic and accepting response from a parent paves the way for the child to continue in his writing (Avery, 2002). Teachers can build upon the literacies that students bring with them by inquiring into their cultural lives and emphasizing the value of communication patterns between students and their family members. Heath (1982) found

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that when literacy patterns between parents and children were different from the ways school valued, children were judged by what they couldn't do rather than for the different literacies they brought with them.

When families write together, there is the potential for members to learn about each other in ways not previously revealed. It is important to remember that writing is exploration and discovery (Murray, 1991). During a writing workshop offered by Briggs (2001), a mother learned the whole story about when her son first got into serious trouble with his friends when he was in the fifth grade. She thought that she knew what happened, but learned the entire story this time from her son's perspective and in his own voice as he wrote about the incident and then read his story aloud to her. The mother remarked that if she had only asked him to write his version when it happened, she would have dealt with it differently. Briggs begins her writing workshops by inviting participants to generate a list of memories beginning with the most recent and going back in time to the earliest. It is a simple list with a word, phrase, or sentence to denote it. The writing progresses from there with the participants' own list of topics. Briggs reminds us that these brief moments in time can be packed with emotion that can develop into a powerful story when shared between family members and the writing group.

During a family writing project in her third grade class, Tassopoulos (1995), asked students and their parents to volunteer in a joint venture to write a book together. One parent was very hesitant at first about working with her son on a writing project: "...I was scared: he wanted me to be the co-author. I also teach third grade and when it comes to working with him, we often butt heads. I wasn't sure this would be a 'meaningful' experience. The book worked out better than my wildest dreams...I saw a

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determination that I was proud of!” (p. 73). Another parent shared, “When Lauren, my oldest, was in third grade, I was pregnant with my fifth child, I could see that this was both a source of happiness and sadness for her, so writing a book about her feelings seemed like a great idea. When we began work on *And Baby Makes Seven* in the evenings, we would lie on my bed and think about what to write...The book provided the perfect opportunity for Lauren to really express herself and for me to reassure her that I would always love her and that she would always be special” (p. 73). Tassopoulos said she wasn’t looking for perfect finished products, but instead, that her real goal was “to inspire families-the true partners in education-to learn the joy of reading and writing together” (p. 74).

Family writing workshops involve families in an active learning community. Parents are their child’s first learning partner (Hill, 1989; Perkins, 1994; Shockey, Michalove, & Allen, 1995). Sharing is an integral component of the writing workshop. As parents listen to their children’s stories and can ask questions when they don’t understand or need more information thereby helping their children in the writing process. Beleky, Clenchy, Goldenberger, and Tarule (1986) described this process as drawing out the child’s ideas, and noted that there exists a large body of evidence to support the notion that “parents who enter into a dialogue with their children, who draw out and respect their opinions, are more likely to have children whose intellectual and ethical development proceeds rapidly and surely” (p. 189). Vygotsky (1978) linked a child’s learning and development to close conversations and “problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (p. 86).

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Family writing groups provide an opportunity for parents to talk with each other in a supportive community. These groups also provide the context for families to become curricular informants as teachers learn to integrate information gained from families into their literacy practices in school (Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984).

Writing is a means for us to express our thoughts symbolically. Since children first learn about language through listening to how it sounds and then mimicking what they hear into their own spoken language, Britton (1982a) suggested that young writers be allowed to write in their expressive voices, or to write as they talk, allowing their oral language to shape their writing. He further advocates that children be encouraged to write about what is most important to them and to write to someone that matters to them (Britton, 1982b). Writing to an authentic audience makes writing meaningful for children (Parsons & Ward, 2011; Pearson, Raphael, Benson, & Madda, 2007). Our goal should first be to understand what the child has written. Horn (1993) wrote that it is “feeling understood...that encourages the student to probe deeper to elaborate” (p. 31). Then once the young writers have achieved the confidence to fill the page, then, as Mayher et al. (1983) suggests, we can offer feedback on meaning, clarity, and eventually, correctness.

Electronic communication such as texting and e-mail are very common between family members today, however, young children frequently lack the keyboarding skills to write electronic text fluently and not all schools and homes have access to these resources (Dodge, Husain, & Duke, 2011). Writing by long-hand remains the best way for families of young children to write together. During a writing project implemented by Newman and Bizzari (2011) that they called “Friday Letters,” children wrote informational letters to their parents each week highlighting what they were studying and their behavior.

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Parents frequently responded back to their children with personalized notes. Newman and Bizzarri noted, [the Friday Letters] strengthened the connection between students, teachers, and families” (p. 280).

This article highlights a family writing group that involved four families (all the names have been changed). The Rieman family included Karis, the mom; Tim, the dad; and daughters Lottie, age seven; and Landra age five. The Cozzo family included Sharon, the mom; and twin seven-year-old daughters Carina and Clarissa. The DeGaglia family included Kara, the mom; Jadon, the dad; daughters Macy, age seven; Tami, age four; and son Mack, age nine. The Riese family included Sarah, the mom, and daughter Madie age three. The families met once a week in the evenings for four weeks. The meetings took place in Jenn’s (second author) combination first and second grade classroom located within an urban, Midwestern community known for its diversity.

The family writing concept and the overall structure of the meetings were adapted from a writing program developed by Kelly (2006) in which families from a community school are invited to participate (see Figure 1) in meetings during which children and parents write and discuss together topics that are related to their lives and personal experiences. After families volunteered to participate, surveys were sent to them to gather background information that was used for planning the meetings (see Figures 2 and 3). With information from the surveys four writing meetings took shape (see Figures 4-7). Each of these meetings lasted about an hour and followed a similar format that included a welcoming beginning during which families could talk with each other while munching on snacks. Each participant was given his or her own writing journal and these were passed out at the beginning of each meeting and collected at the conclusion. During the

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meetings, families wrote collaboratively and individually in the journals and discussed their writings in family groups and in the whole group. A concluding survey was given to participants in order to collect their overall reflections about the writing meetings (see Figure 8).

This inquiry project was developed from a qualitative case study (Merriam (1998). The decision to focus on qualitative case study methodology generated from our desire to discover meaning from the participants rather than test a hypothesis. In our project, the case included the families that participated in the writing project. Our orientation to qualitative case study inquiry was interpretive (Eisner, 1994). Our goal was discover from the family members what learned about each other from writing together. We wanted to know what they learned about writing, how the writing influenced them, and what their writing revealed about family culture, relationships between each other, community, and school. Merriam (1998) noted that the key to understanding the phenomenon being examined is to consider from the participants' perspectives, not the researchers'. It is for this reason that the families were encouraged to write and share however they felt the most comfortable in doing.

Supporting Writing at Home

Prior to the workshop beginning, parents were asked how they supported and encouraged writing for their children at home. Sarah, a first/second grade teacher at the school and the mother of Madie age three, responded:

My child mostly draws and pretends to write. I always ask her what her picture is about. If she tells me she has made a book, map, or list, I ask her to tell me about it. At her preschool, she dictates stories for her journal (about her pictures). We

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always read through these at home. She also has started to ask me how to spell words...We listen for the sounds together so that she can write it. She has her own tablet for art/craft and drawing/writing projects. She has lots of different writing paper and drawing paper, as well as pens, pencils, markers, and crayons. She also has a lap desk for times she wants to write/draw elsewhere in the house. She has a few Magna Doodles for drawing/writing when we travel.

Most parents shared that they read their children's stories aloud and helped them spell words that they wanted to use in their writing. Parents also provided writing materials and time to write and draw at home. All of the children commented that they enjoyed writing at home and sharing their writing with their family members.

First Meeting: Thirty-second Interviews

During the Thirty-second Interviews and Fill-in-the-blank Poems (Kelly, 2006) adults and children had the opportunity to learn something about each other that neither one knew before. Jordan, husband to Kara and the father of Mack age nine, Macy age seven, and Tami age four, commented about learning that two of the girls in the group were twins, but this was not at first obvious to him until after he was involved in two separate interviews with them. He also learned something about his wife that he didn't know before, and was quite surprised:

Today I learned two girls were twins in our group. But this fact was made aware to me after they told me separately that they had a dog named Aladdin. It's fun to learn about others, especially the kids. After the exercise I was informed that a mother and I need to get together to play scrabble. Also, my wife informed me that her favorite color was pumpkin-what! The fun part about any exercise like

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this is that once the momentum gathers while you are interviewing a person you get the feeling that you could go on and that the question and answer penned could generate into real conversation-this was fun!

Karis, Tim's wife and mother to Lottie age seven and Landra age five, said the writing caused her to think more deeply about herself:

Writing about myself made me stop and think of myself in different ways than usual. I like how it nudged me to take some risks and think about who I am beyond my role of mom and professional.

Most of the children commented about the details that they learned about others in the group:

Lottie, age seven: I remember mommy loves our dog and daddy. Kristin dosent go to movies. it was fun! and it was crazy also. I engoyed all the poems every one wrote

Carina, age seven: I did not now aBot Lottie and I did, not now aBat Macy! I did not now aBat Miss reppy [Riese] or Lotties mom etre.

Clarissa, age seven: MoMS Fav. Coloer is Red

Carina Fav. Coloer is Pink

Mrs. Rcpie Growd up in New Jerse

Teachers sometimes find just allowing their students to write makes them feel uncomfortable. They often feel that they should be offering more direct instruction, guiding the writing, shaping the writing, giving examples and prompts. Students in-turn also wait for this instruction to happen before they write. Many times they are taught to wait and stopped from writing before instructions are given. Jenn reflects upon this issue:

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I don't think I was as well prepared as I could have been for guiding the journal writing and giving directions for it. I was thinking it would be fine to just tell them to think and write, but this was more challenging than I expected, especially for the kids.

Second Meeting: Photo Memory Writing

Photo Memory writings (Kelly, 2006) engaged the families in sharing and writing about their histories, values, and social connectedness. Karis shared and wrote about a photograph taken at her and Tim's wedding rehearsal dinner:

This snapshot was taken at our wedding rehearsal dinner in August 1995. It captures our joy and how in love we were, and how fabulously tan I was. Tim's grandma was a very special person in his life, and I am so grateful that I got to know her before she passed away in 1999. She was determined to be part of every aspect of our wedding. I remember feeling nervous whether she would be able to walk up and down the long flight of stairs at Giovanni's Restaurant. Tim's best man and childhood friend was sitting next to Tim. He is so lively and welcomed me warmly and also admonished me that I better be good to Tim, because Tim is a wonderful guy. It was so wonderful to be welcomed into Tim's circle of family and friends. Our wedding was such a hopeful and joyful time in my life.

Hearing about other's memories was enjoyable and heart-warming.

Writing about our wedding almost 14 years ago reminded me what a good catch Tim is. It will help me not sweat small marital annoyances so much to think back to our wedding weekend.

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Tim's Memory Photo Writing was also about their wedding:

This is my Grandma Margaret Rieman. She and my Granpa Karl, behind her, came to our wedding using sheer determination. Their happiness was so clear! They taught us all how to live simple content and happy lives. In spite of dementia, my grandpa always had an answer for why he married grandma: "because I loved her." It was as simple as that.

This is my friend Ted. He's sharing a quiet moment with my friend and best man Don near the end of our wedding reception. He and his mother drove up from Oklahoma to surprise us at our wedding. It was an opportunity-an excuse, but she didn't need much of one, to visit her grandchildren in Marion. The quiet of the picture contrasts with the tragedy to come. At about the time this was taken, Ted's mother Ada and her grandchildren drove off the road and rolled the car. She and a granddaughter died, shattering the peace of the day.

It's always fun to hear what the girls [his daughters Lottie and Landra] like to hear about their own and our childhoods. "Tell me a story" now means telling the girls about one or the other. Landra especially likes to hear funny stories about when we were little or when she was.

Lottie shared a Memory Photo Writing about visiting her grandparents in Texas:

This was the first time I was in Texas and I was at grandpas house and I rode on a air plane four the very first time too. that night we tricked our grandma and the trick was that we came two days early and in two days it would be easter day. and I have a lot of ether meoreys too!

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Sarah and her daughter Madie had a connecting Memory Photo Writing that revolved around trips to Disney World. Madie made a drawing to represent her writing and dictated what it said to her mother:

I like Daisy, Tigger, and Minnie. We are smiling. I am at Disney, Tigger's doing something really funny. Minnie is pretty.

Sarah's Memory Photo writing coincides with Madie's:

When I turned 10 years old, my parents surprised me with a trip to Disney World in Florida. I remember they pretended I won the trip. They gave me a fake letter that said I just needed air-fare, but they said they didn't have the money, and I cried! Later, they said that they had saved up for the trip. My mom and I went with my mom's best friend and her daughter. I mostly remember Epcot Center. I think because my mom did not like rides! We probably spent a lot of time there. I also remember that we rented a car, and I thought that was so fancy! I remember taking "super model" pictures posing in front of the car. I also remember my dad sent a birthday card along on the trip. When I opened it, it said, "I hope you have a 'piercing' time!" When I returned home from Florida, I was going to get my ears pierced! Not that I wanted to leave Florida, but it made leaving a little easier.

It was fun to do this activity, and it was interesting that Disney World has played a big role in both my and Madie's childhoods. I think part of the reason I wanted Madie to go as a preschooler was because I didn't have that experience. I also thought of more details after initially writing. It made me realize that one picture memory can include many details for writing!

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This was the second time that the families gathered for writing and sharing. They were much more comfortable with each other. They sat closer to each other and their conversations flowed easily. The children were actively involved with the older ones writing and sharing from their journals and the younger ones writing and sharing from the Writing Table. It has been said that every picture tells a story, and this was certainly true during the Memory Photo Writing activity. The events, places, and family members in the photos not only sparked writing and discussion, but also served to bring family members and strangers closer together. Karis and Tim both reflected about their wedding day and how in doing so, they have a renewed sense of appreciation for each other and their family. Lottie reconnects with her grandparents as she recalls going to their home in Texas for the first time. Sarah realizes that she and her daughter have shared memories together related to a family vacation spot that they both visited, not only mother and daughter, but also separately as children. Work-partners, such as Jenn and Stephanie, also have an opportunity to learn more about each other and develop a sense of community such as Jenn reflects in her journal:

I am enjoying having my teammate, Sarah, participate in this writing group. We have worked together for seven years now, and are good friends, but we're learning more about each other through the activities we've been doing. It was really neat to listen to each other's childhood memories.

The Third Meeting: Expert Writing

The Expert Writing activity gives everyone the opportunity to be recognized as an individual. By this time the writing group members have come to understand that they share commonalities between family members and between group members even when

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each family is different in their culture and ethnicity. Differences can also be valued.

From this activity, the group members shared their individual uniqueness as they related to something that they not only felt passionate about, but also something they felt that they knew a lot about, possibly more than others, therefore making them an “expert” in the topic. We all want to be known for our specialties and have others recognize us for what we know.

The DeGaglia family shared first with Kara revealing her knowledge and passion for theatre. She first thought of some questions that the group might ask her, and then she answered these questions in her piece:

What are the terms for the parts of a stage; stage terminology-What are some terms that come from theatre history?

Many theatre terms come from long ago. Theatre terminology for stage directions one needs to know. Down stage means walk forward towards the audience. This term is “down” because long ago, as far back as Medieval times. Stages were “raked,” or slanting forward. Opposite is up stage. Other stage terms are stage right, stage left, stage right is actors right stage left is actors left. Different types of stages-Proscenium is one with a frame-theatre in the round is when the audience is all around the stage-a thrust stage is where part of the stage comes out into the audience.

Jordan shared his interest in golf and brainstormed a list of questions that the group might ask him:

Golf

How many holes in a round of golf?

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What is a birdie?

Is a good score low or high?

Is it hard to hit a golf ball?

How many clubs do you use?

Macy shared her love for playing piano:

I think PePole will ask what color are the Keys?

She began her writing piece by drawing black and white piano keys and labeling them.

She included labeling for soft and loud keys and an illustration and labeling for the three pedals. She continued in her piece to share her knowledge of playing the piano:

Hello my name is Macy my expert is Piano. I have 2 ribbons and one trophy

I've been doing Piano for about 2 Years it's a fun instrument to Play. And I'm very proud of how I'm getting better every day, month and year.

Mack also shared his expertise at playing the piano:

do you Play Piano?

What are the Peddals for?

What are the blackkeys for?

What do the marks on the sheets mean?

of keys 88

Colors – black and white

There are different types of pianos

- keyboard small

- upright piano big

- Grand piano big

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I've been Playing for 3 years

The Rieman family shared next with Tim writing about his passion for playing the guitar:

What is a guitar and what are its parts for? How does it make sounds?

- string vibration, sound board Holes

- pick fretboard tones

How does it make music?

- chords

- fingerpicking

- melody lines

Karis shared her knowledge of making salsa:

Do you like very, very spicy salsa? What is the best way to make your salsa spicy? What makes salsa good or bad?

Salsa is an important part of a balanced diet. Most salsa has Timatoes as an ingredient. Not all salsa. Also called hot sauce. Used to give food flavor.

Ingredients can include jalepenos, habrano, onion, cilantro, Timoto, pineapple, peaches, lime juice, salt, sugar. It can be cooked or just fresh. Pico do gallo if not cut and mashed. Slices of jalepenos make it hotter. If you want mild salsa, try leaving seeds out or just eat catsup.

Lottie wrote about her expertise with colors:

Hi my name is Lottie, I'm expert on colors and also how to mix colors. There are the colors, Blue, green, purple, yellow, pink, orange, Black, Brown and red and here is what you can mix together to make another color: red + Blue they make

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purple + red + white make pink + Blue + yellow make green + red + yellow make orange and all the colors make Brown or black depending how much you put in. and there are more colors too like indigo + aqua + hot pink.

The Riese family shared next with a collaborative writing between Sarah and her daughter Madie. Madie began their piece with a drawing resembling a duck's footprint and they wrote the following:

Caring for ducks. What do you feed the ducks? How many times do they eat each day? Why do they come to your house? Do they have ducklings? Do they sleep at your house? (yard) Do they swim? Do they fly? Why do you feed them? What else do you do to take care of them?

The ducks eat corn because they're hungry. We get the corn from the bird store. Bread can hurt their tummies and corn is good for them. We live close to a river and they come close to our house to get food. The year 2 daddy ducks came. The past 2 years, a mom and a dad duck came. We have a water dish for them. They like to drink from it and splash in it. After they eat and drink, they sometimes rest and sometimes waddle away. We can see them fly to our house and then we know they're hungry.

The Cozzo family shared next with Sharon writing about in vitro fertilization.

What is the process? Why would you go through it? How much does it cost?

Reasons you would go through in vitro

Causes of infertility

What process consists of hormone shots, create a lot of eggs, timing, retrieval, injection, implant, and wait

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Clarissa shared her expertise in basketball:

Basketball extert. how do you Play? Why do you like it? James nesmeth invented
Basket ball. I've been doing Basket Ball For about 1 year [after she wrote, she
drew a picture of a basketball and a basketball goal]

Carina wrote about her knowledge of princesses:

expert Prisass. my name is Carina. look how I Like Jasmine. and I like Areland
Arora and I like All the prisass and Like Ball and Cidrala and so wet and a difrit
Prisass tate I do not now now and tare little toys like Bords and Poley Pcits and
tay igSit.

The families wrote and shared about the things that define their family's culture: food, music, art, sports, and family structure. These things also have roots within the community in which they lived.

The Fourth Meeting: Reflecting Back

This was the culminating meeting for the Family Writing Group and a time to reflect back upon the group's shared experiences. The family writing group was a time for families to gather together to write together and share their writing with each other. Understanding was discovered between family members and between family groups. Individual differences and uniqueness became points of interest for discovery, writing, and discussion. Significant points of reflection are highlighted below from the family writing journals that speak to what was important about the family writing time.

Lottie: I lerend that writeing is fun! [she inserted a backwards "and" symbol here]

I will always remember how fun this was this writeing group was fun because

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there was always something to do [backwards symbol for “and”] I will come back back because it was fun I like dowing the interviews

Karis: The Expert Poem activity really made me think about who I am beyond my parenting and work roles. I enjoyed an activity with our whole family and getting to know other parents’ kids.

Sharon: The writing group was a great way to spend the evenings doing something different with our children.

Tim: This writing group was fun because of the people involved.

I would participate again because it’s important to help Lottie and Landra love learning.

Carina: I Like cos we Wit ard. The srcl and tod hoo old. We are and tod are.

Name and woth You like. Woth You LrndLike hi [she drew to hearts] old. that are [we are not sure what Carina was exactly saying in her journal, but she was passionate about writing it down, and signified her joy about the writing experience with her unhampered efforts towards writing and the inclusion of two drawn hearts].

Inspiring and Encouraging Students to Write

Sometimes the best writing emerges as the student simply begins to write from personal inspiration and imagination (Routman, 2005). Teachers can spend too much time requiring students to preplan their writing pieces causes them to lose interest and motivation before they even begin to write the content (Luoma & Tarnanen (2003).

Graphic organizers are frequently used in the pre-writing stage, and they can be effective when used sparingly, but requiring students to start every writing piece with one can turn

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into a worksheet activity that may stifle writing exploration and creativity (Thompson, 2009). Students find meaning and purpose in writing programs that focus on their lives, interests, and families (Busch & Ball, 2004). Writers do not naturally use the same sequential steps for composing a piece, instead, writing is a discovery process in which the text takes shape as the student writes (Anderson, 2001). If we try to make our students fit into a prescriptive program, then we risk suffocating their natural voices. Anymore, much of the writing students do in the classroom is in preparation for test taking (Routman, 2005), but if we foster a joy for writing within our students, then an increase in writing scores is more likely to be a by-product.

Many teachers also focus on the teaching the mechanics of writing because that is what they were trained to do, and these concrete skills are easily taught and measured, but lots of practice writing sentences and paragraphs does not necessarily lead to good writing. Quality writing can be taught, but teachers will need to rethink and revise their approach. We know that in order to inspire our students to read we need to be inspired ourselves, present and provide exciting literature, and allow for individual choice. This is what we need to do for writing as well. The literature that students are excited about should act as a springboard into the writing that they do. This literature can be used as models for their writing when students are lead to examine the author' craft by asking themselves questions. How did the author make this writing interesting and exciting? How did this author organize this writing to make sense to the reader? What special language did the author use in order to keep the reader's interest? Students should have the opportunity to collaborate on writing and share their writing with each other while they are engaged in writing and not just at the end. Teachers should take on the role of

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facilitator and guide to teach students to use their own writing process to make choices that relate to their writing.

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FAMILY WRITING

Dear families,

As you know, our mission at Waterleaf is “Excellence for All.” One of our commitments is to connect people to create and strengthen our community. We also value the partnership between school and families, believing whole-heartedly that the home is a child’s first classroom. I am writing to eagerly invite you all to a Family Writing Group that I will be leading this spring at Weber.

A Family Writing Group is a community of families that meet together to talk, write, and share their experiences. During each session, our writing group will be engaging in the following activities: (a) sharing about ourselves: interests, talents, and family traditions; (b) participating in group writing activities; and (c) reflecting and doing some individual writing. **Excellent writing skills are NOT required to participate in this group ☺**; rather, this experience is an opportunity for all of us to find more enjoyment in writing and get to know each other better. Along the way, all of our writing skills will naturally be enhanced. This will be a very relaxed, fun, and informal group.

I plan on holding 5-6 sessions this spring, with the first one occurring shortly after spring break. Each session will last about an hour, and will take place either during the evenings or on the weekends. Your entire family is invited: parents, students, and siblings (even the young ones, so you do not have to worry about child care!). There will be activities appropriate for all age groups. I will also be providing snacks and drinks at each meeting.

At this time, I need to find out the following: (a) if your family is interested and willing to be part of this learning community, and (b) what days and times families prefer to meet and work together. Once dates and times have been decided, I will notify all families by sending a letter home. I will also follow up by sending each family an e-mail or making a phone call.

I believe our Family Writing Group is a perfect example of parents and families becoming school partners, as well as teachers and schools valuing families and the home. Please let me know if you have any questions or need more information. I hope you will all consider being a part of this rewarding experience!

Sincerely,

Please fill out the information on the second page and return the form to school no later than Friday, March 13th.

FAMILY WRITING

Please complete this form and return to Mrs. Shaffer no later than Friday, March 13th.
Thank you!!

_____ Yes! We are interested and would consider being a part of this Family Writing Group.

Time preferences: _____Monday evenings 4:00-5:00 or 6:00-7:00

(Check any that apply) _____Wednesday evenings 4:00-5:00 or 6:00-7:00

_____Thursday evenings 6:00-7:00

_____Saturday mornings 9:00-10:00

_____Saturday afternoons 1:00-2:00

_____Sunday afternoons 2:00-3:00 or 4:00-5:00

****I will do my best to accommodate preferences, and the sessions may be on various dates to enable more families to take part in the group. Though I cannot expect everyone to be able to attend every session, I encourage any participation that your family can do!**

Name/Child's name: _____

Number of participants: _____

Phone Number: _____

E-mail: _____

_____ We are sorry, but we are not able to consider being part of this group at this time.

Figure 1. Letter of Invitation

FAMILY WRITING

Think about your own writing experiences. Please answer each survey question by either writing in the blank space or circling the phrase that best reflects your experiences.

1. How often do you write for enjoyment purposes?

Never/Rarely Sometimes Often

2. Do you enjoy writing? Why or why not?

3. How did you feel about writing as a child?

Didn't Like It It was Boring It was OK
I Liked It I LOVED It

4. How is writing used differently now than when you were a child?

5. What are some ways you use writing skills in your “everyday life” (ie: keep a journal, make lists, write letters, etc.)?

6. How do you support/encourage your child with writing?

Figure 2. Writing Survey for Adults

FAMILY WRITING

Put an X next to the words that describe your feelings about writing.

1. I write every day.									
<input type="checkbox"/>	not at all	<input type="checkbox"/>	a little	<input type="checkbox"/>	some	<input type="checkbox"/>	a lot	<input type="checkbox"/>	a whole lot
2. Writing is boring.									
<input type="checkbox"/>	not at all	<input type="checkbox"/>	a little	<input type="checkbox"/>	some	<input type="checkbox"/>	a lot	<input type="checkbox"/>	a whole lot
3. I like to write in my free time.									
<input type="checkbox"/>	not at all	<input type="checkbox"/>	a little	<input type="checkbox"/>	some	<input type="checkbox"/>	a lot	<input type="checkbox"/>	a whole lot
4. I enjoy writing notes and letters to people.									
<input type="checkbox"/>	not at all	<input type="checkbox"/>	a little	<input type="checkbox"/>	some	<input type="checkbox"/>	a lot	<input type="checkbox"/>	a whole lot
5. I like writing at school.									
<input type="checkbox"/>	not at all	<input type="checkbox"/>	a little	<input type="checkbox"/>	some	<input type="checkbox"/>	a lot	<input type="checkbox"/>	a whole lot
6. I have trouble thinking about what to write.									
<input type="checkbox"/>	not at all	<input type="checkbox"/>	a little	<input type="checkbox"/>	some	<input type="checkbox"/>	a lot	<input type="checkbox"/>	a whole lot
7. It's fun to write things at home.									
<input type="checkbox"/>	not at all	<input type="checkbox"/>	a little	<input type="checkbox"/>	some	<input type="checkbox"/>	a lot	<input type="checkbox"/>	a whole lot
8. I like to share my writing with others.									
<input type="checkbox"/>	not at all	<input type="checkbox"/>	a little	<input type="checkbox"/>	some	<input type="checkbox"/>	a lot	<input type="checkbox"/>	a whole lot
9. Writing is fun.									
<input type="checkbox"/>	not at all	<input type="checkbox"/>	a little	<input type="checkbox"/>	some	<input type="checkbox"/>	a lot	<input type="checkbox"/>	a whole lot
10. I wish I had more time to write at school.									
<input type="checkbox"/>	not at all	<input type="checkbox"/>	a little	<input type="checkbox"/>	some	<input type="checkbox"/>	a lot	<input type="checkbox"/>	a whole lot

This is how I feel about writing (Circle one)



Adapted from the following website: www.noah-webster.org
 Figure 3. Writing Survey for Children

FAMILY WRITING

Sign-in/Welcome/Snacks/Visit/ (5-10 Minutes)

Distribute Writing Journals

Circle Opener (5 minutes)

- “What is something interesting or unique about yourself?” Give a few seconds for participants to think, and then share around the circle. At the same time, participants will introduce themselves and add something personally interesting or unique about themselves.

Activity 1: Thirty-second Interviews (Kelly, 2006) (20 minutes)

- Purpose: To learn more about individual members of the group, and to prepare for our first journal writing activity.
 1. Have group members line up in 2 lines facing each other – one line of parents and one line of children.
 2. In 30-second increments, parents and children will take turns and “interview” each other. They can come up with their own questions or use the questions typed up for this activity. In each partnership, each person will get 30 seconds to respond to the question.
 3. After one minute, one line rotates so that children are matched up with different parents. Continue a few more rounds.
 4. After a few rounds of parents and children interviewing each other, switch rows so that children are interviewing other children and parents are interviewing other parents.
 5. Conclude interviews and give participants about 10 minutes to respond to the following prompts in their writing journals: “Write about what you learned about yourself and others in this activity. “What surprised you?” “What was interesting?” and “Was this activity easy or difficult? Why?”
 6. Share responses aloud if individuals feel comfortable enough to share.

Interview Questions (type these and give copies to everyone present)

What is your name?
Where were you born?
What is your favorite movie?
What is your favorite sport?
What is your favorite food?
What is your favorite game?
What do you like best about spring?
What do you like best about summer?
What do you like best about fall?
What do you like best about winter?
What is/was your favorite subject in school?
What is one of your talents?
How do you describe yourself?
What do you like about the city in which we live?
What do you like about the school?
What do you like best about your neighborhood?

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What is one of your funniest memories?
What is your most prized possession?
What makes you scared?
What is one of your happiest memories?
What do you like to do with your family?
What are some important qualities in a friend?
Where have you traveled to?
If you could live anywhere, where would you live?
What was one of your most embarrassing moments?

Activity 2: Fill-in-the-blank Poems (Kelly, 2006) (20-25 minutes)

Purpose: To reflect about ourselves and record some of our thoughts into a framed poem.
We will also share our poetry.

1. Show the poem template to the group, read it, and give directions. Explain that we will begin this activity tonight, but may need more time to complete it next session.
2. Give participants time to fill in the blanks of the template to complete a poem about themselves. Participants may work alone or in small groups.
3. As people finish, they may reread their work and quietly share with others who are finished. If everyone completes the poem, we can take time to share aloud. If not, we will share aloud at the next session.

Fill-in-the-blank Poem Activity

Think about yourself – your interests, memories, and beliefs. Read each of the sentences or phrases carefully. Fill in each blank to complete an original poem about yourself.

(Name): _____

From _____.

Who believes in _____,

And loves _____.

A person who would like to have _____,

Visit _____, and _____.

(Name): _____

A person who has fun when

_____.

Whose funniest memory is a time when _____

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_____.

And whose most prized possession is his/her _____.

(Name): _____

A person who loves to eat _____,

Who is embarrassed when _____,

And who wants friends who _____.

(Name): _____

(Three adjectives describing yourself): _____,

_____, and _____.

Session One Conclusion

Explain to the participants that they will have time to complete the Fill-in-the-blank Poem at the beginning of Family Writing Session Two. In addition give them the following assignment for Family Writing Session Two: "For our next writing session, please bring along a photograph of a special memory or event from your childhood. It could be a birthday party, a family vacation, friends, pets, or anything else that holds special meaning to you. Please each family member bring his or her own. If you do not have a photograph, you may draw a picture of your memory or write a short description about it. We will use these photographs, drawings, or descriptions to help us with our next writing piece." Collect the Writing Journals from the families, and tell them that you will pass these back to them at the beginning of the next session.

Figure 4. Family Writing Plan and Activities for Session One

FAMILY WRITING

Sign-in/Welcome/Snacks/Finish Fill-in-the-blank Poems (5-10 minutes) **Pass back Writing Journals**

Activity1: Share Fill-in-the-blank Poems (Kelly, 2006) /Writing Journal Reflection (20 minutes)

1. Give group members a chance to finish writing their Fill-in-the-Blank Poems about themselves.
2. Go around and share with the group; people can choose to read the entire poem, or just part of it. The families can help each read or read chorally with their children.
3. After everyone has shared, give time (5-10 minutes) to reflect in individual Writing Journals.
4. Writing Journal Prompts: “What did you learn about others?” “How did you feel about this activity?” “What did you learn about yourself?”
5. When families are finished writing, they can quickly share their reflections with those sitting around them until everyone has completed their journal reflections.

Activity 2: Childhood Memory Photograph/Drawing (Kelly, 2006) (25 minutes)

1. Arrange participants into family groups and have each group quickly share about their memory photograph/drawing.
2. Give families time to write out the “stories” or memories that go with their photographs into their Writing Journals. Each individual writes about his/her own memory, but families can help children write and draw.
3. Once everyone is finished mix them up again into pairs.
4. Pairs read each other their memory pieces.
5. At the end of the sharing, everyone will “report” about their partner’s story to the whole group.

Session Two Conclusion

Explain to the participants that for Family Writing Session Three they are to think of something they are an “expert” on. Tell them that: “Being an ‘expert’ means you either know a lot about the topic, and/or have some experience with the topic. It could be a hobby, talent, a person/place/thing you’ve studied, a sport, a musical instrument, a game or anything else that you know a lot about. Please come to the next session with your topic idea. You do not need to prepare anything else; we will be doing the planning, writing, and sharing at our next session. Collect the Writing Journals from the families, and tell them that you will pass these back to them at the beginning of the next session.

Figure 5. Family Writing Plan and Activities for Session Two

FAMILY WRITING

Sign-in/Welcome/Snacks/Finish Fill-in-the-blank Poems (5-10 minutes) **Pass back Writing Journals**

Activity 1: Expert Reports: Beginning Writing

1. Explain to the participants that we will be learning from each other during this Family Writing Session Three about a variety of personal topics that may be new to us.
2. Invite participants to brainstorm of a list of questions that could be asked by others in order to learn about their topics. Give them the example of baseball (or ask for someone to volunteer his/her topic), and the following questions might include: "How do you play the game?" "What are the rules?" "What materials do you need in order to play?" and, "How many positions and what are they?"
3. Invite each person to generate and record in their Writing Journals a list of questions people might want answered about his/her topic. Next, ask people to use their questions to help organize a written piece about their expert topics.
4. Invite families to work together and spread out around the classroom.

Activity 2: Expert Sharing

1. Invite each person to share their expert information piece with the whole group. Allow time for 1-2 follow up questions after each presentation.
2. When everyone has shared, allow a few minutes for participants to write a reflection into their Writing Journals about anything that was significant to them regarding the Expert Reports.

Session Three Conclusion

Invite participants to bring a food item to share with the whole group during Family Writing Session Four. Ask them to prepare something that has special meaning for their family. Collect Writing Journals from the families, and tell them that you will pass these back to them at the beginning of the next session.

Figure 6. Family Writing Plan and Activities for Session Three

FAMILY WRITING

Sign-in/Welcome/Reflections (15-20 minutes)

Pass back Writing Journals

Activity 1: Family Discussions at the Table

As people are eating, share and discuss: “Why did you choose to bring this item to share this evening?” After families are finished eating, invite them to write for Activity 2.

Activity 2: Conclusions: Writing Journal Reflections (25-30 minutes)

- Explain this will be a time to reflect about this Family Writing Group. Offer the following writing prompts on chart paper: *My favorite activity was ____ because ____, I learned ____ about ____, I will always remember ____, This writing group was ____ because ____, I would/would not do this in the future because ____.*
- Encourage families to write together and help each other as needed
- Pair up kids with adults and invite them to share their responses with one another.
- Invite that each person to share something they found out from her/his partner. For example, “Maia’s favorite activity was the 30-second interviews because she liked learning about so many people.”

Session Two Conclusion

Invite families to complete feedback forms and give families certificates for participation.

Collect the Writing Journals from the families, and explain that you will return them when you have finished recording any needed information.

Figure 7. Family Writing Plan and Activities for Session Four

FAMILY WRITING

Please take a few minutes to give feedback about Family Writing Groups. This information will be useful for any future Family Writing Group planning! Thanks again for participating!

1. What did you like best about this group? What was challenging?

2. How did this group compare to your expectations?

3. How has this group been helpful or useful to you and/or your family?

4. If this group were to continue, what would you change? What would you keep the same?

** Feel free to use the back for any additional comments*

Figure 8. Family Writing Feedback Survey